

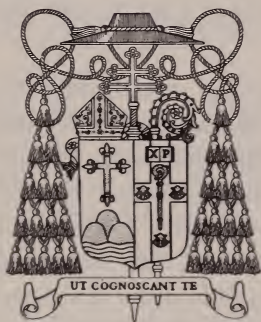
*A Call to Catholic Women
for the
Apostolate of Works of Love*



By

Richard Cardinal Cushing

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While reading the other day the magnificent Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, I was reminded of our ever generous and charitable Catholic women.

The apostle recounted to the faithful in Rome some of his missionary labors. With unmistakable but justified pride he recalled his achievements in helping to lay the foundations of the Kingdom of Christ. Then he proceeded to set forth the fruits of his meditations on the great doctrines which formed the heart of his preaching and the teaching of the Church. He described the great part he had played in the clarification of the mysteries of the Faith, and he provided in his epistle a superb summary of the beliefs and the duties of Christians, the dogmatic creed and the moral code of Christian life.

St. Paul concluded this epistle with a request for the prayers of the Christians in the City of Rome and with affectionate greetings to indi-

viduals, which clearly indicated that Saint Paul, faithful to the spirit of the Church, did not rely on the laity for prayers alone. He insinuated, if he did not specify, their cooperative participation in the Church's apostolate through the performance of works of love.

Thus he recommended to the consideration and for the praise of the Church at Rome a woman named Phoebe, whom he described as active in good works and suggested that the Romans assist her whenever she required their help. "For," he adds, "she has helped many, including myself." What a beautiful tribute to a woman otherwise unknown to history!

He greeted also Prisca and Aquila, devoted lay apostles of his day, whose names are still remembered affectionately in Rome because Paul mentioned them. He called them "my helpers in Christ Jesus, who for my life have risked their own necks."

In speaking of Prisca and Aquila, Paul uses a phrase which perfectly describes the intimate relationship between the works of the Church and the personal lives of the laity who become identified with it. He writes, "greet also the church in their house!"—Why this greeting? Because the Church is a part of the household concern, the family business, the domestic life and love and action of those who are co-workers with the apostles and their successors.

By these and other individual salutations the apostle paid tribute to the positive, effective manner in which great-hearted lay people of his day gave their time, talent, substance and themselves as co-laborers with him and the other apostles in the works of love and mercy sponsored so ardently by the infant Church.

You have heard that ours is the age of the lay apostles. But the passage from St. Paul's epistle, which I have recalled to you, is evidence that from the very beginning every age, in the mind of the Church, has been the age of "the priesthood of the laity". There is nothing modern or novel in this idea; it is a basic element in the complete concept of the living Church.

The Bishops hold a place in the life of the Church in our day and in our country comparable to that of St. Paul. If, therefore, I would write an epistle, in the spirit and manner of this great apostle, to the centers of the Faith in the United States, to whom would I send greetings of gratitude and affection? Whom would I recommend for special recognition?

The answer is not difficult. I would salute the priests and religious who are commissioned to perform special works of love in the Church. Then like Paul in the opening sentences of his epistle to the Romans, I would commend all the faithful—all God's beloved, wherever they are.

True, however, to the spirit of Paul, I would recall with particular affection and special gratitude those in the United States who are the spiritual descendants of Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Mary and all the others who were Paul's "helpers in Christ Jesus". I would greet with great affection and praise the Catholic lay women, who, for our sake, "have risked their own necks", in whose homes the Church has found an intimate place, in whose lives are reflected the grace of God and the image of His Mother and in whose daily round of duties time and talent, sacrifice and service are given in their various dioceses to God's works of love—for, as St. Paul wrote of his co-workers: "They labor much in the Lord".

With pride and joy each Catholic woman participating in the lay apostolate may substitute her own name or her work for the names and works praised by the apostle in his epistle to the Romans. You are the mighty army of devout women in the United States who strengthen the hands of the Church through apostolic efforts throughout our country and in foreign lands—millions of women who take seriously their religion and the obligation that rests on them to be workers of the Church and of Christ. For the Church and Christ are one.

In this capacity I salute you, the Catholic women of the United States, and if it were possible I would single you out, as Paul of old singled

out individual workers for the Church, to honor those who answer the sublime call to active participation in the works of love which you perform in the name of Christ.

There is little need for me to insist on the necessity of that call. Popes, bishops, priests and religious have duly appointed tasks to discharge. Their official responsibilities are of a nature such that no one else can accomplish. God, Himself, in organizing His Church and providing for its administration, has ordained and decreed their rights, functions and responsibilities. He has done the same for every member of His Mystical Body. There are, for example, vast areas of apostolic action, seemingly unlimited fields for good works, which the hierarchy and the ordained representatives of Christ cannot even reach or, if they reach it, cannot successfully perform.

There are whole areas in the field of teaching which exclude the direct influence of the ordained and the consecrated. Who shall say that teaching itself is not intimately bound up with the spread of the Truth revealed by God and taught by His Church? Hence, the special dignity and important place of the lay teacher within and without the system of Catholic education! Surely a Work of Love is this.

The domain of politics is not proper part of the priest's or the prelate's immediate concern, but who shall deny that the law of every land

should concur with the law of God, and that the City of Man should be conducted in a manner consistent with the sublime principles of the City of God? Hence the need for women in public life who have a sense of the Eternal and a belief in God and the supernatural order. This is also a Work of Love.

Medicine and scientific research; nursing and related sciences—these are hardly within the competence of the ordained ministers of Christ, but who does not acknowledge that all healing must be hallowed by the grace of the Divine Physician? Hence the sacred as well as scientific vocation of the devoted physician, nurse or social service worker! Works of love and mercy are these.

And there are countless others: the arts and crafts; the press and writer's skill, all these are beyond the abilities of the priest or prelate as such, but surely the good news of redemption is part of the wonder and the wisdom that devout artists, journalists, novelists, poets and printers yearn to tell others.

Business, banking, the able administration of temporal affairs; the work of the lawyer; the vocation of the mother; the apostolate of the career woman,—these, too, form no part of the deputed task of those called apart to do, in their own way, and in their own areas, the Will of God through the performance of what we call "these

works of love". All these and many more, however, are essential to the complete, successful fulfillment of the mission of the Church. All of them involve vocations from God Himself; vocations bound up with God's Providence for His Church and with His Will for the redemption of the world.

We sometimes speak of vocations as if they belonged only to the priesthood or to the religious life. This is not true! Every call to a good work or to your "works of love" is a call from God. Every dedicated career that contributes to the advance of the Kingdom of Christ is a vocation. Every worthy calling, entered upon with the intent to honor God, to save one's soul and to serve others, is a vocation. Prelates and priests, religious and others who live under vows, do God's Will in their own way, a way of unique and incomprehensible excellence. But you, in all the honorable pursuits of your lives, are no less called to do that Will even though the nature and the manner of your vocation be different.

Clergy and laity alike are called to bring the gospel to our generation, to penetrate the temporal order with the saving principles and precepts of eternity. The response of some to that call is direct, of others, indirect. Some answer as leaders, some as loyal followers. Some bring to pass God's Will by direction, some by indirection. Some are

obliged to do their work in public, some labor privately, unknown and unsung.

But the great fact remains that we all share in the work, that all of us are co-workers, helpers of Christ, tools of the Divine Carpenter of Nazareth in whatever capacity and whatever degree. We are all stewards of His interests, custodians of His Cause.

A few years ago two noteworthy messages were dispatched to America from two European cities. The first came from Rome. According to a long-standing custom, Pope Pius XII had given instructions to an assembly of priests who were to deliver the Lenten sermons from the pulpits of the great churches of Rome. In the course of his remarks His Holiness rebuked those who had not heeded the exhortation he addressed to them more than five years previously when he urged them to create "a front as strong as granite" against the rising corruption of social and economic life. His Holiness asked, "How does this front make its firmness and its strength felt? What has it done to accentuate the intolerable contrast between immoderate luxury and a poverty that is often shameful and heart-rending?"

"What the Church urgently requires," the Pope added, "are groups of the faithful in all walks of life whose entire existence and whose every activity conforms with the will of God."

The Sovereign Pontiff concluded his address by warning that the root of modern evils and of their baneful consequences is not ignorance—but lethargy of the spirit, weakness of the will, coldness of the heart.

About the same time that His Holiness was urging new zeal, self-sacrifice and service on the part of his spiritual children, a spokesman for Communism in another European city was scoffing at such programs. In a directive issued to his subordinates, the head of the Prague City Hospital in Communist Czechoslovakia instructed them to “strongly discourage” the visiting of patients by their friends and relatives. Visiting the sick and presumably all the other corporal and spiritual works of mercy were characterized as “capitalistic” customs which must not be encouraged in the hospitals of Czechoslovakia.

“How much valuable time,” he said, “has been, and still is, being wasted unwarrantedly, by visits to the sick! The relatives and friends of hospital patients would do better by joining a Voluntary Brigade and doing extra Sunday work in our factories and on our farms.”

These invitations to action extended on the one hand by the Pope, and by the Communist Doctor on the other, are the perennial alternatives to serve either God or Mammon.

My dear Catholic women: you can best heed the papal clarion call for action—and most effec-

tively counteract the power of our Communist foes—by promoting and perfecting in your respective parishes and elsewhere those manifold works of love which serve to protect, promote, and preserve the spiritual life of both benefactor and beneficiary and, incidentally, constitute a vigorous vindication of the divine origin, mission and perennial vitality of our Holy Faith.

Family welfare service, the care of children, the rehabilitation of the maimed, protective and convalescent services, programs for the sick, the unemployed, the homeless, the transient, the refugee, the escapee, the visitations of the institutionalized and the imprisoned, emergency care for the victims of disasters, the social and spiritual needs of the members of the armed forces, the protection of the immigrant, parochial schools, the religious training of young and old, the defense of the under-privileged against discrimination and bigotry, the apostolate of the press, campaigns of social reform—these and other worthy causes receive your attention. You do not work by proxy. You personally visit the homes of the needy with alms, sound advice and creature comforts. Personal effort and sacrifice constitute the keynote of your activities. Group work makes possible their extension throughout your dioceses, the nation and the world.

Your efforts do not stop with material help. For you know that money is deaf and dumb. It is

deaf, because it does not hear the complaints of the poor. It knows not their wants and cannot share in their sorrows. You know that money is dumb, also, because it cannot bring any spiritual comfort, not pour into broken hearts the salutary balm of hope nor give confidence in a better and eternal life.

You also recognize your own limitations for you cooperate with and readily request the help of reputable agencies in the community. You have a hearty respect and rich enthusiasm for the full-time professional workers as God-fearing associates in the work of charity. You likewise appreciate, more than all others, the effectiveness of your work in opposing the misleading claims and false hopes of subversive forces and you are sensitive to unjust legislation that leaves the poor poorer and the minority groups abandoned. All these and more are your works of love, motivated and inspired by love of God. They testify that your love is not idle; that your peaceful souls must inevitably look beyond themselves to other souls in which the peace of charity may not yet reign supreme; that your hearts overflowing with love of God cannot remain within themselves; their affection must extend to lives and hearts of others.

Forgetfulness of others is confession of an empty heart. Generosity in the exercise of works of love is proof of a heart filled to overflowing

with true love. By a marvelous disposition of His Providence, God has made it possible and necessary to help one another. There is no one, however great, who is not in some way dependent on others. There is no one so lowly that he cannot give of himself for the support and relief of some one who is in need. We must not be spiritual isolationists, for it is God Who draws us close to one another in bonds of interdependence which reflect the dependence of all of us on Him as our Creator and our Father.

The beauty of God's plan for our cooperation with one another is not the superficial beauty of an architect's drawing. It is the beauty of life as we live it according to God's law. In the confusing roar of the big city, where uncounted thousands are in bodily and spiritual need, behind the still silence of the countryside which shelters so many who yearn for solace and strength, among young people who are struggling to interpret their natural longing for holiness in terms of the enticements and opportunities of a sinful world, among old people who have suffered bitterly from the fierceness of competition and the relentless struggle for life's passing rewards, among the under-privileged and the under-nourished, among the blind and the lame, among those whom God has destined to be deprived for a life-time of bodily integrity and normal human efficiency, among all who have

been victims of disease and misfortune—among all these we see the divine plan slowly transforming itself through works of Christian love and mercy into the tangible and enduring structure of the mansions of eternal happiness.

The lives of others are very much the business of us all. It is the function of charity to make us one with one another, and unite us all to God in the practice of the works of mercy. It is not necessary that we be masters of the theological and philosophical sciences to instruct one another in the principles of Christian living and to open up to one another the vistas of truth that originate in the infinite Being of God. It is not necessary that we have reached the pinnacle of holiness before undertaking to make known to others the truth which God has revealed. When we find ourselves offering rationalizing excuses for our failure to engage in the works of love, we may well look into our unrefined and unsanctified human selfishness for the basic reasons for our indifference.

If love and joy and peace and mercy are found within our homes, it is most probable that our hearts will be filled with divine charity that will overflow into wider areas of the community. Then we will have expanding hearts, not hearts of stone that will become stifled in dreary errands of selfishness and hatred. Under the all-pervading influence of divine charity the open hand of

beneficent love will replace the closed fist of selfish aggression, and the crushing hammer of cruelty will be discarded as men follow the example of the Good Samaritan in pouring oil and wine into one another's wounds. Instead of division and separation, we shall have unity; instead of struggling against one another for selfish goals, we shall work with one another in the fear and love of God.

These are not the dreamy speculations of an impossible idealism. They are confident predictions of the necessary consequences of divine love. Centuries of experience should have taught us that the human heart cannot find satisfaction in the search of passing pleasure. Our hearts can be filled only as they empty themselves in the exercise of Christian works of mercy. Sacrifice is the language of love, and only love rooted in God can fill the human heart.

When the Church was in her infancy the women of apostolic times were hailed by the great St. Paul for their special works of love. Their ideals were sublime. They cannot be easily achieved. They require that you be among the best and most elite members of Christendom, united in the spirit of truth, justice and love; ready to serve and to sacrifice yourselves for others and to see in every soul Christ the Lord, on the hills of Tabor or Calvary rejoicing or suffering in the members of His Mystical Body.

To be worthy of your vocation, to live consistently in its glory—to rejoice in your works of love and to reflect in your daily lives their triumph, this is your privilege as Catholic Women. The Church entreats that you so live. The times require it. *God wills it!* I pray that you will always answer this call so clear, so sacred, so divine.

*By His Eminence,
Richard Cardinal Cushing*

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